

***Video address to the Sewanee Family
On June 17, 2020
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Vice-Chancellor and President***

Greetings Sewanee Family!

I am delighted to have arrived on the Mountain to begin my tenure as the 17th Vice-Chancellor of the University of the South and Mayor of Sewanee. I am speaking to you today from the Jessie Ball duPont Library here on the Domain.

Let me begin by saying a word of thanks to my predecessor Dr. John McCardell and his wonderful wife Bonnie for their exemplary leadership and stewardship of the Sewanee community over the last decade, but most especially over these last several months. When conditions permit, we look forward having a public ceremony to properly thank them for their years of faithful and steadfast service.

In this difficult moment in the life of our nation, there are some trusted and enduring verities that will guide us through the next months. The University is devoted to liberal education—an ethos that values facts, that values science, and that values faith, not least faith in our future together here on this Mountain. I am grateful to have started my tenure as Vice-Chancellor with a Sunrise Service at Memorial Cross, in which I prayed to our Lord for his guidance and strength to lead our Beloved Community. Rest assured: the University of the South will go from strength to strength, true to its mission of enlightening its students so that they may set forth from the Domain to shed light in the world. That is who we have been, and who we are, and who we shall always be.

The Sewanee community is a family. As such, pain that is felt by any members of our family affects us all. Right now, the African-American members of the Sewanee family are in profound pain. The heinous killings of George Floyd, Breonna Taylor and Ahmaud Arbury by police officers and local vigilantes, and the inadequate response to those tragedies by local authorities, have opened anew the

intergenerational wounds of racism. Every member of our community, regardless of race, looks upon those deaths with shock and horror. Yet our African-American family members know deep in their souls that, but for the grace of God, it could have been they who were so callously murdered by duly authorized or self-appointed agents of the state. For some of them, the trauma may hit even closer to home as it reminds them of disrespectful or violent encounters with the police that they or their loved ones have experienced. Finally, it brings black people right back to the foundational question of our Republic—does our government truly see us as citizens, or even as fully human, deserving of equal treatment under the law?

As a black man in America raising two beautiful black sons, I have also been asking these difficult questions and experiencing these powerful emotions in recent weeks. As your Vice-Chancellor, let me say directly to everyone, especially to our African-American faculty, students, and staff: we see you, we value you, we love you. And yes, Black Lives Matter.

In this troubled time I have been deeply moved by the outpouring of love and support from every corner of the Sewanee family, from the shows of solidarity on social media by student organizations to the peaceful march through town last Friday by members of our community. We will certainly have some challenging days ahead of us as we engage in difficult but necessary conversations about race in our society. And as your Mayor, it is my obligation to remind both the inhabitants of the Domain and those who would visit us here that we will not tolerate violence of any kind against people or property perpetrated by anyone for any reason. Yet I am confident that the spirit of *Ecce Quam Bonum* that has been on full display here in Sewanee in recent days will help our community to navigate these rough seas with grace, dignity and love.

My friends, in addition to the social unrest in our country today, the spread of the novel coronavirus, and the COVID-19 disease that comes from it, has upended life as we know it. All of us have been affected by it, and some of us more than others. If you are lucky, the most you have had to contend with is adjusting to quarantine at home – learning to host work meetings on Zoom or using Blackboard for your academic classes. Perhaps you have been more seriously impacted as the bottom

line of your business fell through the floor or you lost your job when the economic downturn took its toll. Maybe someone you love has contracted the novel coronavirus or, God forbid, has succumbed to COVID-19.

I will share with you that my own family has had to contend with the impact of this disease. We have already lost two beloved members of our close-knit extended clan to this dreadful disease, both of whom were still in the full bloom of their lives. As a critical care physician, my wife Dr. Leelie Selassie has been a frontline general in the fight against this pandemic. Just like her heroic healthcare colleagues around the world, she has been risking her life to treat patients in an ICU filled with those who have been stricken with COVID-19. Given this, I assure you that I am doing my part to protect the health of our community in Sewanee. When I arrived on the Mountain a few days ago, the first thing I did was report to the Franklin County Health Department to be tested for the novel coronavirus. I am sure that, like me, you will be pleased to know that the results were negative.

There is no denying the seriousness of this disease. Yet even as we recognize the threat that the novel coronavirus poses to our individual health and our collective wellbeing, so must we also find a way to navigate this new normal. The most aggressive and optimistic estimates suggest that a vaccine against the novel coronavirus is at least twelve to eighteen months away, if one is found at all. As our scientists and healthcare professionals work at break-neck speed to find effective defenses against this pathogen, the rest of us must take all necessary precautions to balance the requirements of public health against the imperatives of resuming our collective life.

Accordingly, at the University of the South we are making preparations to invite our students back to the Domain as quickly and as safely as possible to resume the residential college life that is the hallmark of the Sewanee experience. There is no question that when we come together again on the Mountain, the rhythms and rituals of our collective life will be substantially modified from what they were before. In so doing, we will be guided by the best available public health practices from around the world, we will strictly adhere to the guidelines published by national and state authorities, and we will adopt the best practices of our peer

institutions. We will have more to say about precisely when and how we will return to residential college life in the coming days. Until then, please know that the University and the broader Sewanee family is hard at work in search of the most safe and secure way to bring you home to do the work that you have been given to do in this place.

To our students, let me say that I know that these are not the circumstances you foresaw for your college experience at Sewanee. To the Sewanee Class of 2020, I say that yours will go down in the annals of the history of our University as a class like none other. The completion of your senior year and your commencement exercises were fundamentally altered by the onset of the novel coronavirus pandemic – a first for any Sewanee graduating class. I know that this turn of events has been particularly hard on you and your families. Rest assured, when conditions permit we look forward to welcoming you back to the Mountain to hold the in-person commencement exercises that you have earned and deserved, and I have already invited Dr. McCardell to preside over them.

To the students who are returning to the Mountain this fall, please keep this in mind. Life often throws us challenges that upend our plans for the future. Sometimes those circumstances only affect us individually. Other times, they come to define an entire generation. Your ancestors had their youthful plans upset by the crushing economic blows of The Great Depression and the call to fight fascism in World War II. They had to decide where they stood on the great questions of the 1960s, like the war in Vietnam or the fight for civil rights. And they had to make those difficult choices and face those tough circumstances when they were about your age. Just as they rose to the challenges of their day, I am confident that you will do so as well. Education happens not only in the classroom, but also all around us. We are determined that, with God's help, those who live and learn in Sewanee in this unprecedented time will emerge from the experience with a greater measure of knowledge, wisdom, patience and grace.

To the parents of our students, let me say that I know that this has likely been an incredibly stressful time for you. As there has been so much uncertainty across American higher education about how to resume classes this fall, you have no doubt

been wondering how we will approach this challenge at Sewanee. Will it be safe to send my son or daughter back to the Mountain? What will the experience be like for them with rigorous new public health standards in place? Will it be worth it financially to send them back now? Or should they just take a break from college until things return to “normal?” As a father of two precious sons myself, I know instinctively that there is nothing more important than the health and welfare of our kids. Even when they head off to college as young adults, to us they will forever be our children. I can promise you that we will not reopen our campus for residential life and instruction until I am personally satisfied that we have set conditions in which I would feel comfortable placing my own sons.

Finally, to the entire Sewanee family – regents and trustees, students and parents, faculty and staff, business owners and Domain residents, alumni and friends – I say to you that this is a time that calls for resilience and resolve. We will hold fast to our commitment to national preeminence in liberal arts education within a caring and diverse community. Ours is a university that was born in adversity, whose founding vision was consecrated here on this Mountain just months before the outbreak of the Civil War, and whose “second founding” improbably succeeded in the midst of the recovery from the greatest trial our nation has ever faced. Over the decades, “the never-failing succession of benefactors” has seen our University through times of great challenge. In the New International Version of the Bible, the apostle James admonishes us, “Consider it pure joy, my brothers and sisters, whenever you face trials of many kinds, because you know that the testing of your faith produces perseverance.” I have no doubt that, by drawing inspiration from the examples of our predecessors and relying on the faith that is the bedrock of our founding, our community will emerge from the present trial stronger than ever. In so doing, we will show the world how good and pleasing it is for kindred to dwell together in unity.

My friends, thank you for welcoming me and my family to this remarkable community here on the Mountain, and for entrusting me with leading the University of the South and the Sewanee community. In the months and years ahead, I hope to prove myself worthy of your confidence and I look forward to the successes that we will achieve together.

Yea, Sewanee's Right, and may God bless you all.